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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the political economy of charter schools to understand the tendencies toward standardization and emulation that these school exhibit. It draws on the developed model of grant-maintained schools in the United Kingdom as an example of the market model's evolution in mass education. It analyzes the promise of such approaches to explore reformers' underlying assumptions and thus offers a window into perspectives that have driven these prolific reforms. The paper contrasts the emerging evidence with the public promises of reformers and contrasts these with the disappointing lack of diversification of options for education consumers. It states that widespread and controversial reforms in education across the globe entailed the introduction of market mechanisms of consumer choice and competition among providers in mass education. The text explores the promise of choice plans and charter schools, the effects of competition, and the reaction to uniformity. It concludes that there is a standardizing tendency inherent in markets that both accompanies and counteracts the potential for diversification that competitive markets can generate. The paper claims that market-oriented reformers generally ignore the constraining properties of competitive markets in their discussion of the potential effects of competition in education. (Contains approximately 225 references.) (RJM)

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# Diversification and Duplication in Charter Schools and Grant-Maintained Schools: An Exploration in the Political Economy of School Choice

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**ABSTRACT:** The movement toward market models for education assumes that consumer choice is liberated through an availability of options from which to choose. Choice proponents in North America contend that the introduction of competition between providers fosters innovation. However, evidence from the UK suggests that emulation has resulted instead. This paper undertakes a theoretical examination in the political economy of education markets to understand these tendencies toward standardization and emulation. It employs Hirschman's work on organizational change to evaluate prospects for systemic reform through such proposals, concluding that the potential for intended innovation is mixed at best — counteracted by standardizing tendencies.

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**It's just like Pepsi-Cola!**
*—Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze, after sampling Coca-Cola at the opening of a new Coke bottling plant in Tiblisi*

Education reformers promote the proliferation of various forms of market models in public schooling largely on the grounds of increased diversity of options from which a consumer may choose. Diversification of options for consumers is, indeed, one of the two central arguments for markets in education, accompanying and complementing the calls for liberated consumer choice. Reformers expect that charter schools and voucher-fed schools in North America, and grant-maintained school in the UK — as prime examples — will foster innovations in curriculum, pedagogy, discipline, and school organization in response to consumer demand. In offering some competition to locally-controlled public schools, reformers promote these laboratories of experimentation in order to disseminate their improvements to other schools, raising standards and practices throughout the system of mass education in a market democracy. Freed from monopoly-political control of the local educational authority (LEA), such schools have both the regulatory freedom and the market incentive to try new techniques and approaches which are discouraged, if not prohibited, in the stagnant and moribund local educational authority LEA schools.

The introduction of market mechanisms into public education is premised on the idea of a consumer-driven system. While freedom of consumer choice is the paramount concern for many, what is the point of choosing if there are not several differentiated options from which to choose? Thus, the idea of a self-diversifying device inherent in these new market-oriented charter and grant-maintained schools is central to the promise of parental choice. However, in North America, preliminary reports indicate that charter schools are not offering the innovative options that were expected in terms of curriculum and classroom practice. Indeed, even strong advocates of charter schools express some disappointment with the results in this regard so far. In this paper, I examine the political economy of charter schools, referring to the more developed model of grant-maintained schools in the UK as an example of the further evolution of the market model in mass education. In looking at the promise of such approaches, I explore the underlying assumptions of the reformers in order to offer a window into the perspectives on markets that have driven these prolific reforms. By contrasting the emerging evidence with the public promises of reformers, the paper takes an excursion through the dynamics of markets as they are portrayed for education in order to understand why there has not been the expected diversification of options for education consumers. It concludes with a discussion of aspects of markets and education reform that appear to have been neglected in the policy discourse.

**Promises and Practices: The Evolution of Charter School Diversification**

Possibly the most widespread and controversial reforms in education across the globe involve the introduction of market mechanisms of consumer choice and competition between providers into mass education. As an instance of this trend, charter schools are possibly the fastest growing education reform movement in North America. In the US, over two-thirds of the states have approved charter school legislation, and over 1200 such schools are in operation in the US and Canada (see, e.g., Center for Education Reform, 1999). President Clinton (1997; 1999) endorses the idea, calling for a vast increase in funding for charter schools, in the hopes that their number may soon top 3000 (American Legislative Exchange Council, 1999; Penning, 1997; Schneider, 1998). Based on the twin tenets of consumer choice and non-governmental provision, these schools are generally organized by a group of teachers, parents, a community organization, a for-profit firm, or any other group that successfully petitions a legislatively designated public agency for a renewable contract, or "charter," to run a school for a period of usually three to five

years. They are publicly funded, and freely chosen by the families of the children they enroll (Nathan, 1996a). Although details of the legislation vary by state and province, essentially the schools are given a waiver from many or most regulations in exchange for the promise of increasing student achievement.[1] Thus, the Hudson Institute's research team on charter schools, Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek (1998a), note: "Automatic exemption from nearly all federal and state laws and rules, and the streamlining of compliance-related paperwork, are necessary preconditions that policymakers must establish if innovative charter schools are to flourish." As both a way of liberating parental choice and as a means of reforming public education, these schools have been popular with state and provincial legislators, as well as with activists whose affiliations span the political spectrum (Manno, et al., 1998a; Nathan, 1996b; Nathan, 1997; Nathan & Power, 1996; Price & Hunker, 1998; Rofes, 1996).

However, while the concept appeals to some progressive and communitarian activists as a means of fostering community and bypassing bureaucratic manifestations of the state, charter schools have been most warmly welcomed by market-oriented reformers seeking to introduce market mechanisms as the key element in reforming public education. There are libertarian proponents of charter schools who presume that parental choice is a social good in itself (Bast & Harmer, 1997; Bolick, 1998a). But most charter school reformers advance the idea by noting that liberated consumer choice will improve education for all — students, parents, potential employers — by forcing institutions to attract and retain education consumers based on the potential academic enrichment that a school offers, and by exploring and experimenting with new and innovative curricula that will improve learning at a school relative to what other schools may offer (Alexander, 1997; Garn, 1998; Toch, 1998; Wells, Artiles, Carnochan, Cooper, Grutzik, Holme, et al., 1998; see, e.g., Boldt, 1999; Harvard Law Review, 1997; Office of the Governor, 1997).

*The Promise of Choice Plans*

This second point of innovative diversification is a central assumption in the wider literature promoting market mechanisms through school choice proposals (e.g., Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997). E.G. West, one of the lead proponents of market mechanisms for education, claims that competition would have the effect of "reducing costs, increasing quality, and introducing dynamic innovation" (quoted in Carnoy, 1998, p. 24). Chubb & Moe's (1990) proposed choice plan inherently assumes that liberating consumer preferences will translate into a diversity of options offered by a liberated and invigorated supply side (see, especially, pp. 221f.) The National Governors' Association (1986, p. 83), a powerful player in education reform in the US, contends that, "Given a choice in public education...Innovative programs will spring to life." The father of the concept of market-organized education, Milton Friedman (1994), predicts that under a choice system, "There will be many more choices, there will be a whole rash of new schools that will come into existence. The government schools will improve, and the private school system will improve" (p. 101). Thus, diversification of options will lead to improved learning opportunities for all students — whether in the "public" or "private" systems. This line of

[1] Observers — and particularly charter school supporters such as the Center for Education Reform in Washington, DC — categorize the various pieces of charter school legislation in order to distinguish between "strong" and "weak" laws (Finn, Manno, & Bierlein, 1996; Nathan, 1997; Rebarber, 1997; Schneider, 1998). They look at factors such as the limits (if any) on the number of schools, the number and nature of institutions allowed to grant charters, the degree to which existing regulations for public schools are waived for charter schools, treatment of teacher union issues, constraints on the types of groups allowed to apply for a charter (for instance, a for-profit firm?), restrictions on allowing new schools to be started, allowing public schools to opt-out of LEA control and in to charter status, or allowing existing private schools to opt-in to charter status, and legal and financial independence. See the Center for Education Reform's criteria and categories at <http://edreform.com/laws/ranking.htm>.

reasoning is premised on the perception that public regulation is fraught with anti-innovative constraints, while entrepreneurial freedom alone can achieve innovation. Therefore, Friedman (1980, p. 163) admonishes that a market-oriented plan

> would produce a much wider range of alternatives — unless it was sabotaged by excessively rigid standards for approval. The choice among public schools themselves would be greatly increased.... And most important, new sorts of private schools could arise to tap the vast new market.

Similarly, Coulson (1996) claims that consumer-driven competitive markets provide "diversity in curriculum, while centralized bureaucratic systems have generally been coercive and pedagogically stagnant." Elsewhere, he sees the profit-motive as essential to innovation because it attracts entrepreneurs (Coulson, 1999, p. 305). Communitarians like Brandl (1998, p. 66) argue that the diversity is a product of competition: "competition's main power comes from inducing innovation. It comes from the fact that consumers and financiers will turn away from an unresponsive or uninnovative organization, public or private, and permit it to go bankrupt and out of existence." Hence, by introducing competition to public schooling, reformers can foster a wide range of innovative options.

*The Promise of Charter Schools*

The same promises are true of charter school proposals, which are, of course, a subset of the wider choice approach. Indeed, the development of diverse and innovative options is central to the arguments promoting charter schools. Of course, diversification of options and innovation are not necessarily mutually dependent concepts. However, in view of the perception of a uniformly stagnant and unresponsive LEA sector, market-oriented reformers combine the two concepts, assuming that any innovation will offer an option distinguished from the status quo, and, conversely, that an option that is distinct from the LEA monopoly represents or requires an innovation. Thus, as recipients of public money, charter school reformers promote their institutions as laboratories that would improve options for learning for all students in the public school system (Arizona Education Association, 1998; Nathan, 1997). In the sample of such promises and predictions that follow, the litany is almost overwhelming. (However, I ask the reader to tolerate the redundancy in this section because it is reflective of the frequency and consistency of claims made in the policy discourse of school choice.) For example, Wohlstetter & Griffin (1997, p. 1) point out:

> Charter schools are intended to increase consumer choice within the public education system. And, most importantly, charter schools are meant to encourage innovation in teaching and learning practices in order to improve student performance. A 1995 survey of charter school founders, conducted by the Education Commission of the States, reported that "better teaching and learning for all kids," "running a school according to certain principles and/or philosophy," and "innovation" were the top three reasons for starting a charter school. (see Education Commission of the States, 1995)

Consequently, the authors note, charter schools are better positioned structurally "to avail themselves of community opportunities and resources, and to implement innovations in teaching and learning" because they are freed from accountability to, and the need for bureaucratic approval from, the LEA (p. 6). Likewise, Buechler (1997) writes of their potential for "innovative" educational experiences and "experimentation." The neoliberal Democratic Leadership Council observes that

> The charter school movement is based on a set of simple principles. Public education must be expanded to offer more choices for students and parents. To create these choices, innovators must be freed from the bureaucratic restrictions of traditional schools. In return, these innovators must be held accountable for results and required to measure up to the standards they set for themselves. (Halpern & Culbertson, 1994; cited in Vanourek, Manno, Finn, & Bierlein, 1997, pt. 4, p. 1)

Writing for the conservative and pro-charter Washington Times organization, Price & Hunker (1998, p. 41) concur with this claim, contending that charter schools will "develop

innovative curriculums designed to meet student-achievement goals set forth in their charters." And on the other side of the cultural battle over school reform, even teachers unions — a purported enemy of both choice and charter schools, and innovation in general — see potential for "a genuine laboratory from which schools and school districts can learn" (AEA, 1998, p. 15).

Advocates for charter schools make this claim forcefully. The Hudson Institute research team that undertook an extensive study of these "new American public schools" called them "genuine centers of innovation" (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998b, p. 490). Moreover, if charter schools are "genuine centers of policy imagination and educational innovation," then the "major purpose of the charter movement...is to inspire the development of innovative and effective approaches to public education" (Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 6, p. 1). Indeed, structural changes in governance liberate experimental and entrepreneurial tendencies, so the "charter concept invites innovation" (Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 5, p. 9). However, after studying these schools in several states, these researchers balked at the image of the schools as a cornucopia of diverse approaches:

> From the perspective of American education as a whole, a better analogy might be to an R & D center where new ideas are tried out. They won't all succeed, and some that do succeed might appeal to only "niche" markets. However, others are likely to be so good as to warrant wide dissemination. This R & D potential is an important part of any policy-oriented appraisal of the charter phenomenon. (Manno, et al., 1998b, p. 490)[2]

As to how the research and development will be guided, and how it will identify successful innovations, these researchers find a standard in the consumer-choice mechanisms of the market that are embedded in the essence of charter schools. Charter schools will configure themselves to reflect a market of pre-existing consumer preferences and demands:

> This consumer-driven system creates diversity and widens choice. It starts with the conviction that the needs and priorities of the clients differ. The schools are created to fit the needs of families and students — not those of system planners, state and local regulations, or union contracts. Families (and teachers) are then free to choose the schools that best meet their needs. (Manno, et al., 1998b, p. 497; see also Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 6, p. 12)

But research and development can be a costly element of economic endeavors — even for large-scale operations in industry and technology that are better positioned to take risks and absorb losses. In smaller operations such as independent charter schools, a bad approach, a poor assumption, an incorrect hypothesis, or even a good idea that is too far ahead of its time can spell the economic extermination of an otherwise worthy enterprise. So what is the incentive for the risk-taking, entrepreneurial innovations in charter operations?

Alluding to the market mechanisms again, charter reformers indicate that motivation for innovation is provided by the need for survival and success. Idealistic teachers attracted by a pedagogical philosophy or a curricular focus may establish a charter school and define success as enhancing the achievement of students (and then they can renew the school's charter). On the other hand, for-profit schools eye the bottom line as an indicator of the validity of a pedagogical creed or disciplinary orientation. In both cases, the ability to increase their capacity to meet a previously unmet consumer demand provides an incentive to unleash the entrepreneurial spirit in identifying and testing potentially popular innovations in a market characterized by competition between providers.

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[2] While here they present charter schools as the R & D centers of public education (apparently, to both test and drive innovations in public school classrooms), elsewhere these authors describe charters as R & D centers intended to have a "subversive influence" on public education (Finn & Manno, 1998, p. 25; Finn, et al., 1996).

*Competition Effects*

But, as promised, charter schools should share these innovations with the wider system — public and private. This can happen in two overlapping ways. First, as R & D centers for the public school system, charter schools can simply offer their innovations and insights to other schools. Being beacons of experimentation and new practices, charter schools might attract the attention of public schools paralyzed by an anti-entrepreneurial culture engendered by their bureaucratic status as a monopoly. Thus, secondly, the cultivation of a competitive culture of schooling means that other public schools now have an incentive to embrace the innovations arising from charter schools. Writing of these competition effects, Finn & Manno (1998, p. 19) maintain that charter schools "give freer rein to creative, entrepreneurial, motivated educators...they spur conventional public schools to improve their performance." These researcher refer to this as the "ripple effect." "Part of the promise of charter schools is that, through competition and choice (as well as innovative practices), they will affect their communities and neighboring school systems as well as the children and families enrolled in them" (Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 5, p. 15).[3]

Charter advocates in the for-profit charter school sector also advance this claim of charter schools serving as a laboratory for the good of all public schools. Benno Schmidt, Edison CEO and former president of Yale University, takes credit on behalf of for-profit endeavors for innovating the public schools: "We provide R & D, private sector capital, technology and training: all of which strengthen the state education system" (quoted in Bilefsky, 1998, p. 18).

Finally, the legislation that establishes these schools also embraces the promise of charter schools as laboratories of innovation. Wohlstetter & Griffin (1997, p. 6) analyzed the teaching and learning goals for charter schools in several states. In California, according to their reading, charter schools are to "Encourage use of different and innovative teaching methods." Massachusetts established charter schools to "Stimulate the development of innovative programs in education," "Provide opportunities for innovative learning and assessment," and "Provide teachers with a way to establish schools having alternative, innovative methods of instruction, school structure and management." Minnesota — the first state in the US to establish charter schools — seeks to use them as a vehicle to "Encourage use of different and innovative teaching methods." Michigan's legislation hopes charter schools will "Stimulate innovative teaching methods," and Central Michigan University — the agency that has established upwards of two-thirds of the charter schools in the state — requires of the schools it charters that they "be pillars of innovation in instruction" (Khouri, Kleine, White, & Cummings, 1999, pp. 7 & 25; see also Horn & Miron, 1999, pp. 2-3, 18).[4] New York recently passed a charter school law. The legislation authorizes

> a system of charter schools to provide opportunities for teachers, parents, and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently of existing schools and school districts in order to accomplish the following objectives:...(c) Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods. (State of New York, 1999)[5]

Thus, the promise of innovations to be provided by charter schools is enshrined in law.

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[3] They go on to warn: "Not everyone in the charter movement subscribes to this theory. For some, their school is a refuge, a haven, an exception, or an enclave, designed to serve those (children and adults alike) for whom more conventional schools are not satisfactory. They do not see themselves as medical researchers field-testing a new vaccine that, if successful, will become widely used. They are more like refugees than pioneers." (pt. 5, p. 15)

[4] CMU's prolific chartering activities were recently limited by new legislation (Hook, 1997).

[5] Ironically, New York's most famous charter advocate already runs a church school that uses the state's curriculum (Hartocollis, 1999).

*A Reaction to Uniformity*

What, then, is the reason or justification for the promotion of this rapidly proliferating phenomenon? The impetus arises largely out of the perception that the bureaucracy-oriented, LEA monopoly schools impose a uniformity across the continent. Peterson (1990) popularized this notion of a public school system characterized by its uniformity, and — along with former Republican US Education Department official Doyle (1994) and other proponents of market models for education — argued that diverse societal wants and needs require an entrepreneurial spirit which necessitates private sector participation in public education. Reagan's Secretary of Education, Bill Bennett and his colleagues also castigate a "one-size-fits-all" system of public education (Bennett, Fair, Finn, Flake, Hirsch, Marshall, et al., 1998). They allude to the way markets work outside of education in the world of consumer goods, noting that the "Big Three" automakers in the US stopped making only large gas-guzzlers when faced with competition from foreign manufacturers. Coulson (1999, p. 318) explains that "Nonprofit schools have no such incentive, and the result has been an almost total lack of innovation and expansion." Chubb & Moe (1990) also assume this image of public school uniformity as their basis for comparing public and private sectors; they assume that differentiated outcomes can only be explained by different institutional environments inherent in a school's location in the public or private sector.[6] Essentially, these market advocates argue against the old common school model as being an antiquated approach in a country now characterized by pluralism and diverse parental perspectives on what constitutes good schooling (Coleman, 1990; Doyle, 1994).

Although observers like Ascher, Berne, & Fruchter (1996) and Tyack (1990) dispute the assumption of a lack of innovation and program diversity in public schools, charter school proponents embrace this perception as a primary rationale for the needed innovation that their reform will offer. For example, the Hudson team contends that "This country is too big and diverse to expect one school model to fit everybody's needs" (Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 6, p. 12). Finn (1997) insists that the non-economic structure of public education discourages innovation, and thus, he and Gau (1998, p. 79) advance this notion of uniformity, noting that, under the *ancien régime*, "every school...was essentially identical to every other."[7]

To summarize, the charter school movement offers what are essentially guarantees that both justify its existence, and help explain its rapid proliferation throughout North America. Choice and charter school advocates see a monopolistic public school system defined by its LEA bureaucracies that imposes uniformity across geographical regions. These writers equate bureaucracy with a deadening uniformity. Thus, the public schools are paralyzed, and incapable of any real reform because true, risk-taking innovation is impossible. On the other hand, charter schools are "innovative, lightly regulated" entities largely freed from bureaucratic constraints (Bolick, 1998b, p. 43). They are structurally liberated and encouraged to pursue daring and true innovation that will enhance teaching and learning throughout systems of mass education.

**The UK Experience with Diversification**

In North America, and particularly the US, the debate around market mechanisms is extremely introspective and provincial. Instead of examining the effect of markets in other education systems, writers in this debate constantly allude to the way markets operate for

[6] The premise underlying this assumption — that public schools are more limited than private schools in their autonomy due to their existence in the public sector -- is disputed by Glass (1997).

[7] In all fairness to Finn and Gau, it should be noted that they contradict themselves on this point later when they list many important innovations that have succeeded in the public schools (pp. 82-3).

consumer products (see below). This focus can be seen largely as a reflection of the fact that there are not yet mature examples of comprehensive education markets in North America.[8] But the references to non-education markets also reflect a hesitancy or refusal to examine the experiences of other nations with regard to markets in education. Terry Moe (1994, p. 23), a leading figure in this debate, correctly points out, for instance, that the UK experience with market-informed mass education "ought to be an integral part of our debate. So far it hasn't been."

Indeed, other nations have gone much further in employing market mechanisms to organize their systems of primary and secondary education. Since the Pinochet period in Chile, for example, market mechanisms guide the production and distribution of education — largely due to the influence of the "Chicago Boys" (students of the Chicago School founded by Milton Friedman, whose ideas inform the thinking of choice proponents in the US to a great extent). Chile supports a state-subsidized voucher scheme across public and private schools (Carnoy, 1998; Parry, 1997).[9] Neoliberalism is also very evident in New Zealand, where reformers reorganized public education largely on market tenets of parental choice and competition between quasi-independent providers (McAllister & Vowles, 1994; O'Neill, 1996; Openshaw, 1996; Peters & Marshall, 1996). The New Zealand reformers emphasized the benefits to be realized from a devolution of decision making to individual school sites, which are governed by councils of parents, teachers, and businesses (Williams, Harold, Robertson, & Southworth, 1997). These institutions are responsible for attracting "consumers" and money, charge user fees (or "donations") in some instances, and are legally recognized by the state through contracts or "charters" between a school's board of trustees and the central government, which thereby maintains strong central control over the curriculum (Deem, 1994).[10] These cases more fully embrace the "pure

[8] Most observers agree that the potpourri of private, parochial, home-schooling, and other options in the US and Canada does not approximate a market in education to any significant extent. These options are limited by one's ability to pay, and have consistently attracted approximately a tenth of all students in the US, largely defined by socio-economic status and cultural distinctives. For a real test of the market model, choice must be substantially available in terms of access. This entails public funding. Although there are several proposals and even programs in their infancy in the US — including state-wide choice plans, privately funded vouchers, and now public vouchers — only the programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland are extensive enough to be considered "markets" in education. And these two programs have only been in operation in this decade. So even while the research on the effectiveness of these two experiments with markets in boosting achievement is inconclusive and highly controversial, at this point, almost all serious research reports on these sites begin with a preliminary disclaimer about the difficulty of drawing generalizations at this early stage .

[9] Regarding the question at hand — that of diversification of options — in Chile, Parry (1997) notes that a largely privatized system of school choice has not led to a flowering of diverse options. In fact, schools in the public sector offer a broader range of programs than private schools, but neither type is distinguished by its pedagogical or classroom innovations. Likewise, Carnoy (1998) claims that any improvements there have come from the reformist zeal of the centralized bureaucracy, not the market.

[10] On a political note, observers note the irony that many governments committed to decentralization through market-oriented education policies are also the ones most likely centralize their power or allow centralization through corporate power — in the UK (e.g., Dean & Burstall, 1995; Hughes, 1997; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998), Ontario (e.g., McConaghy, 1998; National Education Association, 1998; Toronto Star, 1997; Toronto Star, 1999), Australia (e.g., Hannan, 1997), and the US (e.g., Alter, 1996; Molnar, 1996, esp. ch. 3). See McGinn (1992). While some might see centralization tendencies in a policy context that promotes decentralization to be a case of unintended consequences, the determined efforts at curriculum control, for example, suggest instead that it is a case of competing constituencies. That is, while the libertarian/neoliberal "one-size-does-not-fit-all" argument against uniform public provision supports diverse options, it often runs counter to the pro-business argument with regard to need for standardization due to a multitude of approaches, assessment, etc. (see Gerstner in Toch, Bennefield, & Bernstein, 1996). Tension between the pure-market perspective and the arguments for public resource support of private interests provides the fault lines of this split, and is evident in debates over standards,

market" advocated by choice and charter proponents in North America, and have had a longer period of time to develop. Thus, they should represent fertile sites for examining the promise of market mechanisms in the provision of mass education. But the debates around school choice in the US, at least, largely ignore these examples.

However, for the purposes of comparison with regard to innovation and diversification of options for education consumers, this essay reviews the research on the United Kingdom and its education reforms since Thatcher took office. While several of the English-speaking market democracies have moved in this direction in many areas of the public services sector (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Whitty, et al., 1998), the UK and New Zealand stand out in the pace and extent of their education reforms (Gordon & Whitty, 1997; Whitty, 1997). But, most observers agree that it has been the UK that has best exemplified the market-oriented reform approach (Light, 1997; Miller, 1997; Royed, 1996; Yergin & Stanislaw, 1998). The United Kingdom has been a (if not *the*) global leader in privatization of public services, including education — particularly under Margaret Thatcher's government (Boyd, 1996; Guthrie & Pierce, 1990; Hirsch, 1994; Levin, 1997; McLean & Voskresenskaya, 1992; Stearns, 1996; Vann, 1998). The UK is probably the best and most appropriate instance of market-based reforms in the last two decades. And it is illustrative for the present concern: the promises of charter school reformers in North America stand in sharp contrast to the experiences of the UK regarding diversification of educational options through the introduction of market mechanisms into mass education.

There is a substantial body of scholarly research studying the conditions of a "quasi-market" education system in the United Kingdom (on quasi-markets, see below). While there are certainly significant differences in the social, political, and historic contexts between the UK and the US (Carl, 1994; Power & Whitty, 1997), this comparison is pertinent because the logic of the market is now a global phenomenon, and has been embraced as a uniform and universal doctrine in these two contexts, despite contextual variances in application. So, although — or, rather, because — the different political contexts, for example, have allowed market reformers in the UK to implement their agenda more rapidly and more thoroughly than in the more centrifugal political structures of the US, the usefulness of the UK example as the epitome of where North American choice reformers would like to be provides an exceptional basis for contrast with the claims made for charter schools' market-oriented reforms.

The reforms in the UK can be summed up as a penetration by markets into public schooling, precipitated by the policies of the Thatcher and Major governments. The Assisted Places Scheme (APS) was a constrained voucher-type program, supposedly merit- and means-based. The APS held symbolic importance for the Conservative Party as a way to extend the means for attending independent schools to the deserving children of the working class (e.g., Thatcher, 1993, p. 39).[11] However, the APS was an education consumer-oriented policy, and reformers did not promote it as an effort to increase the diversity and innovations of producers/providers. Two other major policy creations, however, are more relevant for this discussion. Grant-maintained (GM) schools "opt out" of LEA control, and receive funding on a per pupil basis directly from the central government. Thus, they are part and parcel of an open enrollment system where the

loyalty to status quo, and suggest differences in conceptions of the appropriate role of schooling in a market democracy. Both perspectives, however obscure the current substantial role of the market in standardizing schools.

[11] Several researchers claim, though, that the program benefited middle-class families, rather than the children targeted in the rhetoric used to justify the program (Carl, 1994; Whitty, 1990). The APS was almost immediately dropped after the election of Blair's Labour government (Hodge, 1997).

funding follows the student. While legally accountable to their controlling board, these schools are primarily accountable to market forces of consumer preference in order to secure the necessary number of students, and, consequently, operating revenue. Therefore, they are free to establish their own mission or specialization in order to focus their efforts and establish a defining place in the education market. More recently — satisfying the main concern of Chubb and Moe's (1992) assessment of the UK reforms — the supply side was further liberated by allowing new schools to be established (rather than simply letting existing schools "opt-out" of LEA status) by independent and religious groups, and get funding as GM schools (Walford, 1997c). City Technology Colleges (CTCs) represent an effort to increase diversity of options for consumers. Unlike most GM schools, CTCs are newly created urban schools (exempt from the mandated national curriculum), and thus, do not opt out of the state system, but are still accessible to through a system of parental choice (Francis, 1990). They are intended to invite significant corporate participation in funding and governance, and feature an intensive curriculum in mathematics, science, business, and technology — part of an effort to create a more effective workforce for the needs of the new global economy.[12] The 1993 Education Act further supported and promoted the market mechanisms embedded in these schools by further decentralizing governance (within the context of a mandated national curriculum) away from LEAs to individual schools competing with each other for students and per-pupil funds (Vann, 1998).

*Notes on Comparison*

The CTCs and GM schools are integral to the market agenda, together forming the primary policy thrusts of the market reforms in education in the UK, and essentially extending choice within a competitive state sector to any interested parent. Together, these reforms center on a few simple elements that are noticeably similar to charter schools in North America: open-enrollment or "school choice," per-capita funding that follows the student, competition between schools for students, and (particularly in recent years) the encouragement of diversification of provision so that parents and students will have substantially different options for which to exercise their choice. This is substantially similar to the charter schools in many states in the US, where the supply is decreasingly, and now lightly, regulated, caps on the number of such schools are ignored, discarded, or portrayed as an impediment to choice, and diversification of options is said to be encouraged by chartering institutions and the market's "consumer" demand (see, e.g., Anderson & Marsh, 1998; Associated Press, 1999; Nathan & Power, 1996).

There are some other obvious parallels to the case of charter schools which deserve attention. The more vocal market advocates want a purely "free" market in the form of vouchers, and see the quasi-market conditions generated by the reforms as a partial achievement in that agenda — one that would be furthered by blurring or eroding the distinction between traditional conceptions of public and private schools, and by legally requiring that education be treated as a commodity (Chitty, 1997; Rethinking Schools, 1996; Rothstein, Celis, Corson, Cooper, & Farber, 1998; see, e.g., DeWeese, 1994; Hassel, 1998; Thatcher, 1993).[13] In both cases, the policies have been promoted with the speed that would indicate wide support for radical measures. Indeed, charter school supporters recommend that reformers utilize the disproportionate support for choice evident

[12] Observers see the attempt to encourage private/corporate financing of the CTCs as a failure (Carl, 1994; Dean, 1991; Dean, 1995).

[13] For example, a conservative think tank official, Lord Skidelsky, restates the ideal of the charter school reformers: "We ought to think of education as a good delivered in response to market demand. As much of it will be produced as is wanted and in the varieties which are wanted. There are no characteristics of education which require it to be produced by the state. ... All state schools should be given the status of legally independent corporations" (quoted in Chitty, 1997).

in poor and minority families trapped in inner-city LEA schools (Aldana, 1997; Barnes, 1997; Chubb & Moe, 1992; Finn & Gau, 1998; Moe, 1994; Murdock, 1998; Shokraii, 1996). In the UK, support for policies that promote consumer choice did not come primarily — as proponents would have liked — from poor and minority groups "trapped" in public schools demanding a diversity of options, so much as what Bagley (1996) argues were white parents "choosing" to pull their children from schools that they perceive as predominantly minority. The degree to which charters may or may not promote further segregation in the US is hotly debated (Garcia & Garcia, 1996; Rofes, 1998; Rothstein, et al., 1998). The most identifiable source of support for choice in the UK (aside from think tanks and business groups) in terms of socioeconomic categories appears to be articulate and active middle-class parents who bring their well-developed consumer skills to bear in using public money to pursue the most advantageous education for their children (Crozier, 1997; Whitty, 1990). However, even here, support for real "choice" has been tenuous. In both contexts, when "choice" comes to mean allowing poor and minority children — regardless of merit or consumer "rights" — to choose to attend an affluent community's schools, support for "choice" does not exist or turns into opposition (Carroll & Walford, 1996; Gerson, 1997; Lacayo, Donnelly, & Edwards, 1997; Stanfield, 1997).[14]

The differences between these two reform examples, on the other hand, are usually only a matter or degree, or involve more technical or contextual — as opposed to ideological — applications of market reforms. In general, the UK has gone further and faster than the choice reformers in North America. While the UK has taken measures to remove constraints on the creation of new schools in the interests of diversifying provision, the reality in North America is that many of the charter schools are simply former private schools that have "opted-in" to charter status. For example, in some cases, the majority of the "new" charter schools were simply private schools that "opted-in" to charter status in order to receive substantial public funds (e.g., Richard, 1996; see also, Oppel, 1999; Schnaiberg, 1999; Simmons, 1999). This is also becoming more prevalent in the UK (Dean, 1993a).

*Themes in the Research*

Thus, a review of the research on diversification and innovation in the UK can hold some important insights into the promise of charter schools in North America. Indeed, the research literature on this experiment in the UK has reached a rather strong consensus regarding various outcomes of its market experience, including the trends towards standardization and diversification of options for parents in the education marketplace.

- *Social class, not consumer preference for various educational options, is the primary consideration in understanding how parents engage, or fail to engage, the education market.* Middle-class parents are better equipped with the skills and material resources to take effective advantage of school choice, while working-class and minority parents have perspectives and cultural predilections that leave them disconnected from the advantages of choice (Crozier, 1997; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Reay & Ball, 1997; Thomas, Vass, & McClelland, 1997). The market advantages and values some "consumers" more than others (Chitty, 1997).[15] Thus, it is overly simplistic to imagine a

[14] Similarly, in the US, for instance, Smith & Meier (1995) found that there was some support among urban students for the idea of school choice, but they did not think choice would work if the "bad" kids were also allowed to choose their schools.

[15] Thus, Ball (1993; also, 1990) and others see the market as a key institution in reproducing social inequities and atomizing potential opposition, and its imposition can thus be seen as part of a class strategy — one that, if not intended, cannot be entirely unexpected. Also, for a view from an advocate of education markets who questions Ball, et al.'s methodology in connecting social class and choice in education, see Tooley (1997).

politically neutral set of consumer choices to which the market responds. Socioeconomic factors color and constrain consumer preferences, so it is reasonable to think that any system of choice would also reflect pre-existing class divisions, rather than simply schools diversifying to reflect politically neutral educational preferences.

- *The freedom to choose from diverse providers is often constrained in a competitive market.* While purportedly about parental choice of schools, the competitive nature of consumer demand for limited space in the most desirable schools means that many parents do not get to choose their child's school based on which aspect of a diverse set of options they prefer.[16] Instead, when oversubscribed schools are effectively able to choose their consumers. That is, initially through covert and, later, formal means, the most popular schools are able and officially encouraged to select which students they admit (Edwards & Whitty, 1997; Fitz, Halpin, & Power, 1997).[17]
- *Rather than simply consumers choosing from equally valuable options, producers also choose from differentially valued consumers.* Certain students — those most likely to make the school most attractive and improve its relative market position through standardized test scores and league tables — are of more value than others who become liabilities. This appears to be true even if the lower-value student's per-capita funding is equal or even greater than the student valued more because of class, race, culture and other indicators of up-market status (Bagley, 1996; Ball & Gewirtz, 1997; Gewirtz, et al., 1995; West, Pennell, & Edge, 1997).
- *Presumptions that creating market conditions would lead to diversification of innovative options for parents have not played out.* When given the freedom to shape their own mission or nature, schools have tended to emulate (or project the image of) elite and traditional education in discipline, curriculum, pedagogy, uniforms, and academic emphases (Fitz, Halpin, & Power, 1993; Meadmore & Symes, 1997; Power, Halpin, & Fitz, 1994).[18] Where real diversification has occurred, it has been the result of government intervention (i.e., the creation of the CTCs), not market forces of consumer demand (Glatter, Woods, & Bagley, 1997; Walford, 1997b).
- *The diversification that has occurred has been on the basis of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic segregation, rather than diverse curricular options.* While new and innovative methods have not been fostered by the market, hierarchies of prestige and desirability of schools have re-emerged, largely related to, and segregated by, social class (Edwards & Whitty, 1992; Edwards & Whitty, 1997; Fitz, et al., 1997; Glatter, et al., 1997; Walford, 1997a; Walford, 1997c; Whitty & Power, 1997). In the case of the CTCs, for example, this means that parents often choose CTCs not because of their technology-oriented curricular focus, but because ambitious parents are "obsessed" with perceived similarities and associations with more prestigious grammar and independent schools (Carl, 1994, p. 309).
- *The competitive market encourages schools to focus on image rather than innovation.* Schools have been forced to pay attention to their marketing, administration, and presentation, often at the expense of educational concerns (Ball & Gewirtz, 1997; Gewirtz, et al., 1995).
- *Presumptions about the ways in which parents would engage in the market have not necessarily played out.* The equating of the "good parent" as a rational consumer, although a primary theme in the government/policy rhetoric, has not been the predominant model.

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[16] Whitty (1990) describes as "ingenious" the government's early claim that parental choice would not lead to schools choosing children and, therefore, socioeconomic hierarchies in schooling. Edwards & Whitty (1997) document the contradictions, ambiguities, and reversals in the former Conservative governments' policies on these issues.

[17] Edwards & Whitty (1997) see a "calculated collective amnesia" on the part of Tory and New Labour policymakers regarding the rejection of selection (schools choosing students) in earlier decades.

[18] While Meadmore & Symes conducted their research in Australia, their analysis can be extended to the British context, where it was published.

Instead of rational self-interest as the guiding principle, parents have tended to focus on other factors — proximity, the child's desires (being with friends, comfort, etc.), image of schools, etc. (Ball & Gewirtz, 1997; Carroll & Walford, 1997b; Walford, 1992).

In general, schools are now in a context where they have to compete for students in order to secure funding — and the "best" students (or ones most likely to increase a school's market share) are pursued though marketing and image-management techniques. While there are certainly exceptions to these primary themes, they do appear to represent the main conclusions of the research literature over the last decade in the UK.[19] Furthermore, they represent the most comprehensive treatment of the most market-oriented education reforms of any market democracy. Yet, the lesson of this experience is not promising for the potential of charter schools to promote diversification and innovation. Certainly, the UK has not witnessed an overwhelming inundation of educational innovations due to competition between providers. Furthermore, the diversification of options that has occurred has tended toward the re-emergence of elitist and segregationist tendencies along race and class lines — trends that would be very difficult to justify in the liberal democratic tradition of equal opportunity and access, and nondiscrimination.

**Current Charter Reports**

The question then arises as to whether these patterns and manifestations of market dynamics in the UK are also evident in North America. In particular, are the findings on diversification in market-oriented schools in the UK mirrored in the emerging evidence on charter schools? Although research on charter schools is still developing, preliminary reports suggest that, indeed, the diversification of options promised by charter school supporters is not appearing — at least not in the ways they had promised.

Recently, several reports on the prolific charter school phenomenon in North America note that there appears to be an apparently unanticipated tendency toward standardization of practice in these schools. What is noteworthy in this highly politicized debate is that these reports come from researchers and observers who have maintained a fairly objective or even pro-charter position on the issue, for the most part. And reports from some more ferociously pro-charter writers appear to at least implicitly affirm these findings.

For example, Hassel (1998, p. 255), a market and charter school advocate, reported his findings from a study of charter schools in several states:

> ...charter schools in Colorado, Massachusetts, and Michigan are generally not engaging in activities than conventional districts would regard as completely new and pathbreaking.... ...the innovations that charter schools are undertaking are by and large innovations that have been proposed elsewhere and, to a limited extent, carried out by existing public schools.

He analyzed the curricular and pedagogical approach of 80 charter schools in 1995-6, and found that 54% reported a "basics" emphasis, a vocational focus, a traditional subject orientation, or a "general" approach; 9% were specific culture-centric; another 36% were "alternative," but featured well-known educational models. Price & Hunker (1998) echo these findings:

> The schools differ widely in instructional focus and procedures, but more than 40 percent of 261 charter-school respondents to a 1996-97 survey indicated that they stressed traditional, "back to-basics" learning or a core-knowledge curriculum. Others emphasize thematic instruction such as music or the arts or public policy. There are charter schools for special education, math, science, high technology, bilingual

[19] The research surveyed for this generalization has been primarily the work of English researchers. For more explicitly comparative work involving the US and UK, see Carl, 1994; Chubb & Moe, 1992; David, 1992; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Deem, 1994; Edwards & Whitty, 1992; Whitty & Edwards, 1998.

> education and foreign language. Still others are alternative Montessori schools, while some promote "school-to-work" programs.

Rothstein and his colleagues (1998, p. 57), admitted skeptics of charter schools, contend that there are "few models of education carried out in charter schools that are not also being carried out in public schools" (including LEA schools that are not facing competition from private or charter schools), and claim that charter schools often abandon their innovative goals when faced with the reality of teaching students and reaching standards outlined in their accountability agreements. Anderson & Marsh (1998) found innovations in hiring noncredentialed teachers, seniority structure, finances, and requiring parental involvement. However, they reported very little in terms of teaching and learning innovations, even after teacher interviews and classroom observations, except in the "controversial" area of home-based instruction (home schooling/independent study — the implications of which are discussed below). In Michigan — a state usually placed just below Arizona by charter school advocates admiring the "strength" of the charter school law [20] — two reports commissioned by the State Board of Education conclude that the promised innovations are not occurring. Although Khouri, Kleine, White, & Cummings (1999), and Horn & Miron (1999) found diverse offerings in a broad array of charter schools, both reports concluded that charter schools are not demonstrating the classroom innovations that they promised to achieve.

> Since all of these schools are newly developed, with the exception of the relatively few converted private or parochial schools, one might expect that innovative practices would be frequent and widespread. However, such is not the case. We found unpredictably few clear innovations.... In fact, we found the charter schools to be remarkably similar to the regular public schools, with the notable exceptions of generally smaller student enrollments, the presence of additional adults (teaching assistants/volunteers) in the classroom, governance, and span of contracted (management) services. (Horn & Miron, 1999, p. 77)

Likewise, Plank & Sykes (1997) see choice and charters as having the effect of bringing more "traditional" forms of instruction back, rather than fostering innovations. Even teachers in charter schools shared this perception of constraining effects on innovation. When asked to respond to the statement, "The school will support / is supporting innovative practices," there was a decline in the percentage of teacher who currently respond "true" — down 25% from those reporting that they thought the statement was true when first joining the school (Khouri, et al., 1999, p. 56).

*Implicit Affirmations*

Indeed, if one analyzes the research literature put out by the more vociferous charter and market proponents, it becomes evident that they also do not have many innovations to show for their experiment. The Hudson Institute researchers who claimed that charter schools are the "new American public schools" and "genuine centers of innovation" (Manno, et al., 1998b, p. 490) appear to be conflating "innovative" (as in new or experimental) with "different" — as in an option that is otherwise unavailable through local public schools (see, e.g., Manno, et al., 1998b, pp. 493ff; Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 6, pp. 6ff). The real-world concerns and challenges that plague public schools also confront charter schools, which seek solutions in pre-existing answers:

> Still other schools — sensing the need for help in bridging the gap between educational philosophy and functional curriculum — buy into a prepackaged curriculum such as Core Knowledge, Montessori, or Waldorf. Some decide to go the route of contracting

[20] See Center for Education Reform, 1997; DeWeese, 1994; Finn, 1996a; Finn, 1996b; Finn, Manno, Beirlein, & Vanourek, 1997; Price & Hunker, 1998; Schneider, 1998; Toch, 1998; Wohlstetter, Wenning, & Briggs, 1995).

> with a provider like Edison, Sabis, or Alternative Public Schools. (Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 4, p. 12)[21]

There is a remarkable lack of evidence from those claiming that the schools are innovative. Often, the claim relies on rhetorical flourishes (e.g., Manno, et al., 1998a), the precedent set by public alternative schools (e.g., Nathan, 1996a), or more hypothetical allusions to expected dynamics of the market from non-education examples (e.g., Friedman, 1995). While Finn, Manno, Beirlein, & Vanourek (1997, p. 49) call the choices offered by non-religious charter schools "dazzling," their description of charter schools does not portray a highly original system:

> A few are places we wouldn't send our own kids; one or two were a little weird. But the great majority of these schools are what most families crave: small, safe places with coherent academic missions and high standards, schools led and staffed by people who believe in those missions and care about kids actually meeting the standards, schools full of students and teachers who want to be there. (p. 50)

Thus, the assertion of innovation is largely rhetorical, at this point, and does not concern itself with evidence. Market advocate Zinsmeister (1998, p. 19) praises the "innovative Edison schools," but provides nothing to indicate the basis for his description. Likewise, Rebarber (1997) — an executive in a school management firm that provides services to charter schools — reports that the "atmosphere among reformers appears to be less bitter and contentious and more focused on the potential of creating innovative learning opportunities." But his extensive report shows next to nothing that is new to classrooms. The potential innovations described by charter supporter Ferrick (1999) involve no pedagogical insights, and little more than the means for the socially ambitious to segregate themselves from poorer children in the LEA schools. Another charter supporter — despite being in many classrooms in his "multi-year study of charter schools in five states" (Rofes, 1996) — reports innovations only in terms of programs that are also available in public schools, as well as with specific populations served (Rofes, 1998; see also Kane, 1998, who includes small class sizes as an innovation).

Charter advocates had hoped that public schools would embrace myriad innovations coming from these R & D centers, but as of now report only structural and programmatic adjustments of LEA schools forced into a competitive context against a more flexible opponent. For example, Glassman (1998), of the American Enterprise Institute, writes of the dissemination of innovations coming from charter schools, but is able to cite only the fact that a local school district has now also been forced to begin advertising for students. Likewise, the Hudson team writes of "ripple effects" in terms of LEA schools seeking grant money, and acting entrepreneurial in management, not instruction (Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 5, pp. 17-8).

*Changing Promises*

It is interesting to note how charter school advocates have changed their argument recently, possibly in response to the lack of novel ways of educating children offered in this experiment. Rofes (1998) claims that the innovations best achieved by charter schools are primarily in the area of governance, not instruction. While noting that stronger laws enhance the ability of charter schools to be innovative, Hassel (1998) now rejects the "laboratory thesis" of charter schools altogether. Hess (1998) cites Elmore in noting that too much innovation can be a bad thing, bringing instability, burnout, low morale, and fragmented reform (something any classroom teacher in a reform-minded LEA could

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[21] Finn's loyalty to the tenet of private sector involvement is peculiar in view of his own reading of the evidence. He has noted that private schools do not take full advantage of their independence and autonomy to differentiate themselves from public schools (see Johnston, 1999). "They're also subject to foolish ideas, and I'm disappointed with how little they take advantage of their freedom."

confirm). Finally, the Hudson researchers backtrack quite a bit in reconfiguring their promise of a "genuine center of innovation."

> Charter critics and jaded reformers sometimes suggest that little is happening in charter schools that cannot also be found in "regular" schools. That's partly true; some charter programs are variations on familiar curricular and pedagogical themes and some represent thoughtful returns to proven but neglected strategies from the past (though often these familiar models are not in widespread use in conventional schools).
>
> In their contexts, however, virtually all charter schools are truly innovative. Which is to say, educational arrangements that may not strike cosmopolitans as novel are almost certain to appear revolutionary to locals who have not previously had access to anything of the sort....
>
> Some charter founders are not even aware that their innovation has been piloted elsewhere — and that they could reap the benefits of others' pioneering. Some schools, too, are so insistent on inventing their own wheels that they fail to learn from their peers or to avail themselves of good materials and experiences elsewhere. Like a home-cooked meal that follows the same menu as a restaurant, many charter-school founders are simply more satisfied when they do it for themselves, even if the food is similar. (Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 6, pp. 5-6; see also Manno, et al., 1998a; Manno, et al., 1998b, p. 493)

Although they claim that charter schools "have taken the charge to be innovative and carried it to new levels," they show virtually nothing new in classrooms to support this grand claim, but instead focus simply on the removal of bureaucratic regulations as an innovation (Manno, et al., 1998a). Thus, they lower expectations for an R & D center for the whole public school system to the more attainable aim of providing more options for local parents. They conflate innovation with differentiation, insisting that "educational innovativeness is best appraised in context" (Manno, et al., 1998a). By assuming a localist-consumer perspective, they once again refer to the world of non-educational material consumerism: "Simply stated, if you crave tea and all the local restaurant serves is coffee, the arrival in your town of a cafe stocked with Darjeeling and Oolong can look like an extraordinary breakthrough" (Manno, et al., 1998a). Finally, in cynically leveling hopes for dynamic innovations, they highlight a quote from the founder of a charter school: "Giving a good, solid, traditional education is innovative today" (Vanourek, et al., 1997, pt. 6, p. 6).

The problem with this tempering of ambitions for charter schools is that it negates the justifications — often encoded in legislation — for establishing charter schools in the first place. If the problems with public education are symptomatic of an anti-competitive bureaucratic culture in a monopolistic LEA education establishment, and if those problems are evident in stagnant and uncreative teaching and learning in the classroom, then changing that governance structure should change the classroom, so the reasoning goes. Said another way: charter reforms are reconfigurations of governance to correct classroom experiences. But now we are seeing an attempt to assess this reform only as an innovation in governance, with little or no weight placed on purportedly consequent dynamic classroom reforms — the *raison d'être* of charter schools since their inception.[22] As Richard Shavelson notes: "the real issue is whether what goes on in the classroom has substantially changed" (quoted in Jacobson, 1997, p. 12). Instead, charter advocates are asking that evaluations be based on other structural factors such as competition effects and customer-approval ratings that are largely peripheral to the classroom experience. Furthermore, it is hardly a compelling argument to ask citizens to fund these experiments and surrender democratic accountability simply so that local reformers can try to re-invent the wheel on their own in R & D centers all over the continent.

[22] Hence, the Hudson team's pre-occupation with surveying people who choose to be at charter schools to see how much they like their choice.

This does not mean there are not diverse options from which parents may exercise their choice. Indeed, it appears that charter schools offer parents enhanced options in such areas as reduced class sizes, technology-focuses instruction, an emphasis on safety and order, and "alternative" options such as Montessori or a "back-to-basics" approach. And charter schools have also taken the lead in innovations involving home-based instruction (and subsidized home-schooling), hiring uncredentialed and non-union teachers, merit pay, and requiring parents to volunteer at the school (e.g., Anderson & Marsh, 1998). Furthermore, charter schools are taking the lead in offering ethnic-group based curricula. Thus the diversification of those options relies on innovations that (1) arose from or have already been tried by LEA schools, or (2) are based on societal divisions which would be anathema to a public system based on the common school ideals of equal opportunity, integration, and non-discrimination (see Gutmann, 1987).

Still, in view of the overwhelming promise of schools freed from bureaucratic restraints — a promise embraced by politicians, reformers, teachers and parents — the early reports of a dearth of educational innovations are curious. Horn & Miron (1999, p. 98) show that the promise has not matched the actual practice, concluding: "While many innovative and unique ideas were highlighted in school plans, in a number of cases...the schools were not able to develop and implement these ideas." Since most people expected to see a hundred flowers blossom, the question arises as to why charter schools have not been the source of the expected copious innovation and diversity of options for parent-consumers. Why haven't there been more innovations? Is this lack of innovation, as Horn & Miron (1999) attest, an unpredictable state of affairs? To explore that question, the remainder of this essay turns to an examination of the political economy of markets in mass education. In doing so, I point to insights offered by the evidence from the UK experience. But I also reflect on the non-education consumer markets that charter school advocates are so fond of alluding to in advancing their arguments. And I examine the implications of each of these two windows of reference on the logic of markets in education.

## Innovations, Diversification, and Emulation, and Standardization: Ruminations on the Political Economy of School Choice

There are several approaches to understanding the failure of charter schools in fostering more comprehensive classroom innovations in teaching and learning. Taken together, the different observations that follow indicate that the lack of educational innovation in market-oriented schools is not so much an unpredictable phenomenon as many have assumed. Moreover, they suggest, although reports of a lack of innovation are preliminary, one might predict the continued standardization tendencies in such schools due to the logical dynamics of competitive markets.

### *Quasi-markets, Centralization, and Chronic Allusions to Consumer Markets*

Charter school advocates base their claims on the innovative potential of markets in education on a perspective that focuses on pure market processes perceived in markets for consumer goods. Yet, although reforms like charter schools, GM schools and CTCs import market mechanisms of consumer choice and competition between providers into the realm of public education (and, indeed, market-oriented reformers often speak of education markets), it is important to note that these are not true markets. Market forces in education are often referred to as "quasi-markets" because they are not pure, free markets and do not achieve the libertarian ideal (Bartlett, 1993). Charter schools, GM schools and CTCs rely on the public sector for funding, regulations, certification, and so forth. When it comes to education markets, it is generally recognized that, as of now, there are no "free" markets, where individual actors are free from all external constraints in exchanging their goods and services. Public education has generally not seen pure markets for a few reasons. First, there is a widely recognized (but increasingly disputed or ignored) social and societal interest in education, for socialization of individuals and cultivating the common good.

This social interest is translated most obviously into public funding of public education. Such funding also brings the state regulatory apparatus into education, usually to seek equity or access, or rights of individual groups, but also — as critics rightly charge — often to perpetuate and expand bureaucratic control. Externally imposed constraints in the public provision of education effectively limit the rights of individuals in order to protect society from aspects of market failure that may lead to what are recognized as socially undesirable outcomes: segregation, hierarchies, or whatever may be viewed as objectionable by society.

Secondly, some argue that, if private-oriented markets were used to organize systems of mass education, those systems would no longer be "public." But if funding is public, rather than through primarily private means, it removes one of the necessary dynamics of the logic of markets, as consumers no longer have the incentive to compare options in the interest of saving personal costs, but look to other criteria instead. For example, Brighouse (1997, p. 506) contends that neoclassical economics is about efficiency, not consumer choice (and markets are poor at equitably distributing consumer goods). He notes that market theory assumes that the purchaser is also the consumer — which is not the case when a parent chooses a child's school. Although parents may serve effectively as what Brighouse calls "proxy-consumers," they are standing in lieu of the child-consumer, not the state-purchaser. While market theory expects consumers to choose rationally between options partially on the basis of cost-effectiveness, the cost side of this equation is absent from the consumer's perspective in a system of fully-funded school choice such as with charter schools, GM schools and CTCs. This lack of pressure on costs will be translated into a lack of incentive for providers to control costs up to the threshold of funding provided by public authorities. While there is an incentive for the producer to control costs in order to increase private profit margins, that does not directly influence the cost efficiency of the funder — in this case, the public — as is necessary in a pure market context. Also, this skews incentive and ability for innovation and experimentation in many cases. While consumers do not have the assumed incentive to shop around for costs, producers can increase profits only by enlarging their customer base or reducing costs on expenses like innovations (explained below). Without the ability to charge wealthy customers more for new options, they lose an incentive to innovate.

Thus, finally, there is an apparent lack of agreement as to which party is the consumer. The student most directly "consumes" educational provision, but is usually not able to choose between different options in an education market system. Parents or families are often proxy-consumers in that they do the choosing of schools for their children, but they do not "consume" in terms of translating the capital effects of an education into personal gain (Brighouse, 1997). There is also a consistent theme with reforms like the CTCs and business- and industry-oriented charter schools that business is the consumer, as the employer of skilled students, who are cast as the "product" of the education system (e.g., Gerstner, Semerad, Doyle, & Johnston, 1994; Heritage Foundation, 1995; Kearns & Doyle, 1988). Finally, the community or "society" could be viewed as the ultimate consumer of education, because the "externalities" of widespread provision involve general social effects — impacting crime rates, fertility rates, social capital, and so on. Yet many neoliberal and neoclassical economists dispute this assignation of society as the consumer because societal benefits are external or subsequent to the purpose of education, in their view, which is directed at individuals (Gintis, 1995).

Thus, for these reasons, there are obstacles and constraints upon the free reign of markets in the provision and governance of education. Quasi-markets are not pure markets by any measure in the *laissez faire* sense. However, the claims and promises of diverse and innovative options in education quasi-markets are premised on presuppositions of purer markets, as perceived with consumer goods like cars or lawn ornaments. Market-oriented



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reformers justify the importation of market mechanisms into public education by alluding to other areas of consumer life more thoroughly in the private sphere — if we allow consumers to choose their toothpaste, then why not their school? (e.g., Gintis in Glass, 1994). Thus, Edison Project Vice President Deborah McGriff (1996) quotes Chester Finn's claim that "it is reasonable for people to select the school they want, just as they select their home, their health-care provider, their college, their church, their clothes, and their dinner." The president of the a state Board of Education who successfully promoted charter schools points to competition in consumer markets: "I prefer to buy from Ford, General Motors, Chrysler, or from a host of other companies that succeed — or fail — based on how well they satisfy the customer" (Durant III, 1997, p. 362). Bill Bennett and his colleagues (1998) draw parallels to American auto manufacturers (incorrectly calling the big three a monopoly) to show how they were forced to respond to competitive pressure from Japanese imports in becoming more responsive to consumer demands. Likewise, Coulson (1999, p. 217) claims we now have "huge range of transportation choices" thanks to the market, while a transportation system run like public schooling would now be offering nothing more than "a horse and a Model T Ford" at very expensive rates.[23] Coulson's solution to education stagnation is a free market:

> The free-market innovations process may offend the sensibilities of educational egalitarians, due to the fact that innovations are usually enjoyed first by the wealthy and only afterward by the general public. Nonetheless, it is the only process that has a proven record of stimulating valuable improvements in technology, and of eventually making those improvements available on a grand scale. (p. 344)[24]

This position echoes Friedman's (1995) insistence that innovation entails unleashing free market forces, since that is the case with consumer goods: "As in all cases, the innovations in the 'luxury' product will soon spread to the basic product."

The insistence of these market advocates on imposing the hypothetical processes of pure market logic perceived in consumer markets onto the decidedly "impure" quasi-market of charter schools perverts the theoretical dynamics of competition as it might manifest itself in the emergence of innovative, experimental, and diverse options for consumers. (However, in noting this discrepancy, I am not arguing here for pure markets, in view of the societal mandates listed above.) While the discongruence between pure market theory and quasi-market practice is a largely theoretical question, and its effects are not yet completely clear, it may be one explanation for the lack of innovation in US charter schools. For example, the guarantee of a certain level of funding on a per student basis means the producer will compete with other producers on the basis of how many consumers will patronize a given charter or GM school, not in terms of attracting more business from any one consumer — particularly "higher value" consumers. (The exception, evident in the UK case, it that some "consumers" take on lower values than others; children who have problems

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[23] Of course, one could argue that there is a greater range of transportation options represented by a horse and a Model T than in all the vehicles produced by Ford and its competitors now.

[24] But as a market purist, however, Coulson correctly notes that charter schools are constrained from increasing innovation because they do not accurately reflect free markets: "If an entrepreneurial private contractor were to conceive of an expensive but potentially very effective pedagogical innovation, he (sic) would be discouraged from implementing it within a charter school system due to his inability to charge a higher tuition to cover his higher initial costs, let alone make a profit. Faced with this reality, charter schools, whether run by nonprofit groups or contracted out to private for-profit enterprises, are unlikely to spend their fixed incomes developing pedagogical advances whose costs they will not be able to earn back. Pedagogical progress is thus apt to languish far behind the pace of market-driven industries, since the abortion of innovations in their early (and expensive) stages means that schools will never have the opportunity to find ways of delivering those innovations more cheaply and effectively, thus preventing them from ever reaching a broader population." (p. 344) This position, however, effectively denies the right of society to constrain choice to protect and provide the public good.

associated with difficulties in education become a liability to a school unless their funding is increased relative to others.) Hence, in a constrained setting such as a school building — especially a smaller scale operation not associated with a for-profit chain — revenues available for experimentation and development are necessarily limited by the set per capita funding which is limited by space considerations. Only operations that are inherently expandable can enrich themselves through innovations that are popular, since they can increase the number of students-consumers they reach through cloning, franchising, or extending the reach of their services through other means. This gives an advantage in innovating to large-scale operations over "mom and pop" schools — an advantage, however, which has its own constraints (see below).

*Corporate Penetration and Consolidation in Charter Schools*

Charter school advocates did not anticipate, or did not admit the likelihood of, the rise of large-scale operations in the emerging charter school market. In fact, for-profit operations, management firms, and corporate-run chains of schools appear to be crowding out the "mom and pop" schools on which many placed their hopes for diversification and innovation. Indeed, the recent reports from Michigan note the tremendous penetration of corporate influence in the charter school sector (Horn & Miron, 1999; Khouri, et al., 1999).[25] That this trend would be considered unpredictable is surprising in view of the consolidation of corporate control of markets in many other sectors (see Taub & Weissman, 1998). Since public education in the US alone is a $300 billion-a-year endeavor, it would be naive to assume that corporations would not take advantage of opportunities like those in the growing charter school sector to penetrate and consolidate this market. And while many charter schools may have started up as independent and autonomous endeavors, any success they may demonstrate, ironically, makes them more attractive to for-profit corporations.

As for-profit providers attempt to increase their control of the market in education, there is no reason to suggest that the corporatization that has impacted almost every other industry through mergers and consolidations — fueled by capital looking for investment opportunities — will not penetrate into schools (Dobbin, 1997; Hill, 1999).[26] In such a system, there is the consequent incentive toward standardization of a product or service due to economies of scale — a benefit enjoyed by public schools through their LEAs. While charter and GM schools may mimic this advantage through the creation and maintenance of charter and GM school support offices and resource centers (often at public expense, see Wohlstetter & Anderson, 1994), charter schools can also attain these advantages (or disincentives to innovation, as they have claimed) through the larger-scale corporate control

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[25] In one year, the proportion of charter schools in Michigan run by management companies rose from 40% (in 1997-8) to approximately 70% (in 1998-9) (Walsh-Sarnecki, 1999). While these figures look at the corporate penetration in terms of the percentage of schools, I suspect that the percentage of charter school students who find themselves in corporate-run schools might be even greater, since the largest charter schools in the state are corporate-run. However, Diane Ravitch disputes the significance of the corporatization of charter schools (see interview in Public Agenda, 1999).

[26] As former junk-bond broker Michael Milken — now released from prison — accurately promised: "I think education in this country is going to be a multi-hundred-billion-dollar industry. That's where I'm going to put my time and money" (Milken, Michaels, & Berman, 1992, p. 100). True to his word, Milken is now a major player in the for-profit education business, owning a stake in Children's Discovery Centers Inc. (child-care and preschools), Knowledge Universe LLC (venture capital in education investment), as well as a portion of Nobel Learning Communities — the largest for-profit education provider in the US (Brown, 1998; Hill, 1999; Walsh, 1998c; Walsh, 1999). Nobel, in turn, owns an 80% stake in the Developmental Resource Center, which runs schools for children with learning disabilities. Yet, while private-sector special education providers serve only 3% of the children in that category, they bring in 7% of the total money spent on special education as revenue — which indicates either high profit margins or poor efficiency.

of sections of the market — in effect, privatized super-LEAs with primary accountability to shareholders, not citizens or even "consumers." There is an economic incentive to limit the diversity of a product to some extent, because of research, development, production, distribution, and support costs; as Terry Moe notes, "innovations cost money. Sometimes a lot of money" (cited in Molnar, 1996, p. 72).[27] Thus, the hated "one-size-fits-all" approach to education that critics claim is inherent to public control is also likely through the cost saving factors of the "cookie-cutter" approach to mass provision of educational services. These standardizing tendencies are becoming more evident with growth of large-scale enterprises such as the Edison Project, TesseracT (formerly Educational Alternatives Inc.), Advantage Schools Inc., or Sabis International Schools — all of which are trying to increase their share of the charter school market, and all of which have a set approach to educating children (Farber, 1998a; Hofman, 1998; Poole, 1998; Rhim, 1998; Sides & Decker, 1997; Toch, 1996; Vine, 1997). Indeed, when Dykgraaf & Lewis (1998) studied charter schools run by management companies such as these, they found strong central control exercised by corporate authorities, and little openness about their activities, which hinders public assessment of their practices.

This tendency flies in the face of the claim that charter schools will share their insights and innovations. The promise was motivated by a perception that LEA schools are plagued by a deadening uniformity (Peterson, 1990), and need interventions that are produced primarily in the private sector (Coleman, 1990; West, 1995).[28] However, such a perception does not explain how a lack of competition necessarily imposes uniformity across 15,000 LEAs in the US. What is the standardizing influence for 15,000 different bureaucracies and millions of classrooms? In fact, the argument could be made that, inasmuch as classrooms now appear similar across different contexts, uniform aspects may be due to market influences on the curriculum, private sector control of employment possibilities for graduates, the rise of individualism, the commodification of public education, and other market effects in standardizing schools (Hogan, 1992; Labaree, 1997). Furthermore, it denies the many innovations produced in the public sector, and, moreover, is premised on highly hypothetical presumption of inherent selfishness of human nature that posits that innovation springs from the possibility of self-enrichment.

But while advocates justified charters largely as R & D centers for public schools, it is becoming increasingly apparent that — even if charter schools were to develop a plethora of new pedagogical approaches — there are not adequate means available through which other schools could have access to those discoveries (Wells, et al., 1998). While market-oriented reformers claim that it is simply the effects of competition that will force LEA schools to improve, the logic of markets also counteracts any role that charter or GM

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[27] Yet, the commonly applied business principle of efficiency effectively limits the resources required for innovation and experimentation (see Welch, 1998). Indeed, ironically, the marketization of a public sector institution such as public education represents an overall standardization of options, challenging the unique aspects of public schools as public institutions, and forcing them to conform more to the dominant "efficiency" model of a private business (see Oettle, 1997).

[28] However, the assumption that innovations are produced in the private sector ignores the extent to which innovative ideas and institutions have arisen in the public sector, and then exited the public school system (e.g., Williams, 1999). Furthermore, there is much evidence that many GM and charter schools used market-oriented reforms to simply provide a private-type education at public expense. In the UK, this has been the case with GM schools that embrace the grammar school curriculum, for example. In North America, the owner of a charter school management company called the Education Development Corporation (EDC) claims he does not pursue innovative techniques, but "uses successful Christian schools as an economic model for EDC's nonreligious charter schools" (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 1997; see also, Oppel, 1999; Reed, 1994; Sanchez, 1995; Schnaiberg, 1999; Simmons, 1999; Van Dunk, 1998).



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schools may play in contributing to the overall improvement of schooling. That is, in a competitive market, schools succeed or fail based on how well they attract and retain students relative to other competing schools. In a case where certain schools are established to produce insights into improving teaching and learning, but also are dependent for their survival on attracting consumers, there is an inherent incentive not to share improvements or insights with other schools — except, of course, any other schools in their corporate chain, as the case may be. (On the other hand, if there were adequate channels set up to disseminate innovations, the free-rider phenomenon suggests that many schools would not assume the costs of innovation if other schools will do so and share with them the discoveries.)[29]

*Emulation and Duplication in Consumer Markets*

While market-oriented reformers justify their agenda largely on the grounds that markets create diversity of options, an examination in the political economy of consumer markets indicates that they are ignoring an equally evident standardizing effect of competition. Depending on the circumstances, a competitive market can also have constraining effects on experimentation, and foster duplication instead of diversity. In a dynamic system of public choice, the logic of markets dictates that providers will try to stake out positions of advantage in order to command the patronage of the majority of consumers. If a provider moves to corner a segment of the market, there is some incentive for other providers also to move in that direction, although not quite to the same extent, in order to capture all remaining business up to and possibly including some of the market share of their rivals (Hirschman, 1970, p. 63). This can have the effect of standardizing options available to consumers, as in a system of school choice.

For instance, this phenomenon is very evident in the arena of party politics in recent years. In both the US and the UK, "liberal/leftist" parties came to power largely by emulating their opponents on many issues. Rather than offering voters real options, Clinton's Democrats (through his Democratic Leadership Council) not only attracted votes, but simply cornered blocs of voters by mimicking the Republicans on economic and social questions. Thus, they took for granted voters further to the left, knowing that there was no other viable alternative to which those voters could turn. Blair's new Labour Party successfully embraced Clinton's strategy in the UK (Ford, 1999; Zakaria, 1998), and the Liberals in Canada and other English-speaking democracies have largely embraced market principles previously thought to be the domain of their conservative (classically "liberal") competitors. While such trends may indicate the presumption on the part of these parties of the loyalty of their members, it also suggests that viable alternatives are not available to tempt these people with the possibility of exiting parties that no longer reflect their beliefs. Regardless, the overall effect is to offer voters less of a clear choice of different options, and many commentators from both the right and left have noted that the political marketplace currently

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[29] Once again, Coulson (1999) — as a pure market advocate — offers better insights into the workings of the market. While he writes of the incentives for charter schools "balancing research-and-development costs against the need to keep tuition down" (p. 305), he also notes that the "only way to entice educational entrepreneurs to take on these risks is to provide them with an incentive that makes the effort worthwhile" (p. 318). Yet, while I agree with his insights into the correct dynamics of the market perverted by charter school designs, I continue to disagree with his prescription that we move toward purer markets to correct the bastardization of market theory. If charter schools are public schools, as they claim, then they have a responsibility to the greater public, and not just their immediate clientele. But under Coulson's free market model, as he notes, charter schools would be able to own and profit from their innovations, and exclude all other students from the enjoyment of their benefits — unless they were personally able to afford to pay. This is the antithesis of any conception of a public system. Furthermore, it demeans the efforts and denies the innovations of all who work for children because of a humanitarian impulse, instead assuming that only personal gain motivates good works.

offers consumers options that are largely indistinguishable.[30] Thus, while stealing issues may work most effectively in a duopoly, it also appears to have some effect in multi-party systems. In Hirschman's framework, issue emulation will lead to discontent of peripheralized consumers/voters.[31] But duopolistic or even polyopolistic powers systems can constrain that discontentment through effective cooperation exercised by "competing" parties. Their confluence of interests may lead to intentionally concerted efforts or collusion caused by the effects of their common interests in maintaining an effective oligarchy. That is, even competing players may cooperate in essence in order to prevent others from also joining the game. Thus, major parties and producers have an interest in the maintaining the "third party" status of third parties. While at times they might look for a minor-party ally in order to tip the balance of power in their favor, they also have an interest in remaining the primary partner in any coalition.

Consumer markets also demonstrate this constraining effect of competition, whether it be PCs and Windows both emulating and crowding out Macintosh products from the computer market, VHS reducing and then ridding the market of the better Beta systems, bookstore chains mimicking the services of and then eradicating small neighborhood bookstores, Japanese producers introducing the minivan only to have US manufacturers adopts the idea and then dominate the market, or large-scale video chains crowding out the corner store. While simple logic tells us that tight competition can inhibit innovation in existing providers by limiting resources available for experimentation (which is risky and may entail a loss), evidence also suggests that a confluence of competitors' interests and efforts can also limit innovation and options. Dunleavy (1997, p. 33) notes these standardizing tendencies for consumer choices (from "hamburgers or computers") in what he terms global "Macworld" capitalism: "The scale of markets and competition has decisively escalated in some areas, screening out local solutions and corporations in favour of transnational companies, dominant brands and standardized solutions."[32] While he notes a diversity of options in some areas, the general "result is that single-market choices

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[30] See, for example, Fraser, 1998/1999; Press, 1996; Reeves, 1997; and Sobran, 1995.

[31] Hirschman — discussing two-party systems — sees any centralizing tendency limited by ideological differences, alert and vocal activists, and practical considerations of maximizing voter support (on one half of the political spectrum, with as much of an imperialistic foray into the other half as could be reasonably pulled off without alienating the party's native base): "adoption of a platform which is designed to gain votes at the center can be counter-productive" (p. 72). Yet a centralizing tendency can be unlimited in an emulative context of no overriding ideological differences — that is, tacit agreement (perhaps subconscious) on major underlying issues, as with the neoliberal DLC aping Republicans on issues like NAFTA, the death penalty, gay marriage, and defense spending. This unrestricted central tendency leaves the more ideologically radical wing of a party (and its non-party associates/sympathizers) unrepresented. Voters on the extreme are certainly "captives" of the main parties in terms of the reality of the unlikelihood of success of launching an alternative party, and thus their power of exit is limited (by their numbers) while their power of voice was often amplified (by their alertness). But when ideologically emulative mainstream parties disown the ideologues at the ends, loyalty keeps people with discernible ideological convictions from creating a potentially successful party that would offer a clearly ideological alternative to the mass of voters in the center. Many such disenfranchised "have tried to exert influence within one of the major parties, have failed, and later decided to work on the outside" (p. 85). But much of their potential support rests in similarly frustrated people who refuse to leave the party, despite the fact that their rapidly diminishing voice and potential organizational alternative points to the exit sign. These alert voters, even more than the potentially fertile pool of inert voters more to the center, are letting their loyalty preclude a "rational" option. But this apparent irrationality serves a purpose, as Hirschman states: "Even though...parties in a two-party system are less likely to move toward and resemble each other than has sometimes been predicted, the tendency does assert itself on occasion. The more this is so the more irrational and outright silly does the stubborn party loyalty look; yet this is precisely when it is most useful." (p. 81)

[32] Or "McWorld" capitalism.



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expand, but the overall range of choices across different countries' markets may reduce." In his discussion, he points to the restaurant industry as an example of an instance of globalization which no one anticipated four decades ago, but which has heavily standardized not just food choices, but "*how* customers are served." Ritzer (1996) writes of the "McDonaldization" of market society as market forces pursue and impose a predictability that reduces all human needs, desires, and relationships to a common economic calculus. Other observers also note the "Disneyfication" of culture that undercuts global diversity (Hannigan, 1998; Seabrook, 1998). Similarly, in the "marketplace of ideas," several authors have recognized the constraining effects of corporate control of the media in a competitive consumer market. Mazzocco (1994, p. 5) writes that the narrowing competitive field limits the scope of what is considered reasonable by the news media, and thus what is legitimized as pertinent for popular discussion and debate (see also Bagdikian, 1997; Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

And, of course, success breeds emulation. Whether through innovation or the reintroduction of "tried and true" practices (or any other inexplicably popular product or service), if something "works" in terms of attracting consumers, competitors will try to duplicate that success by duplicating whatever brought on that success, up to and including impinging on any proprietary rights of the successful operation. This emulation is readily apparent from the research on the choice system in the UK. There, rather than engaging in educational innovations, market-oriented providers tend to emulate successful schools — institutions characterized by their up-market clientele — through the introduction of innovations often peripheral to the classroom such as uniforms, discipline codes, symbols of traditionalism, and other forms of image management (Glatter, et al., 1997). When they make changes in classroom practices, they generally do not introduce new practices, but reintroduce older approaches associated with more exclusive elite schooling — such as the academic emphasis of the grammar school curriculum — in order to attract the best students with the least amount of problems, who would be the easiest to educate and cost the least amount of resources. In North America, charter school reformers also need to show results. Joe Nathan (1998, p. 502), a leading proponent, warns charter schools to consider "best practices" already proven in other schools: "Charter advocates ought to look at carefully evaluated, proven approaches." Moreover, the justification for charter schools that calls for the to disseminate their innovations assumes that other schools will duplicate their practices (although it is not clear what incentive under the logic of markets might encourage schools to share successful secrets with competitors).

Part of the issue in these cases maybe the illegitimacy of the assumption of market-oriented reformers that consumer demand shapes markets. In their advocacy of charter and GM schools, proponents of school choice contend that schools will rise in response to consumer preferences. They assume that a pre-existing landscape of the wants and needs of educational consumers will be reflected in the geography of a reactive market. School choice advocates contend that consumers control the market. However, there is much evidence to indicate that the causal arrow also points in the other direction as well; that is, markets can also shape consumer preferences. Producers cultivate wants and needs in consumers. In that respect, simply witness the billions that market entities invest in advertising and image manufacturing, particularly around products for which there was no pre-existing demand. Furthermore, in some markets, producers or providers can select their consumers. In education, this means that schools choose the students. This has increasingly been the case in the UK, as schools now set out criteria for prospective students in order to better pursue the school's mission or philosophy (Dean, 1993b; Dean, 1993c; Edwards & Whitty, 1997; Fitz, et al., 1997; Walford & Pring, 1996; Whitty & Power, 1997). While this has been officially encouraged in recent years, it was initially done through covert-selection techniques — e.g., parent interviews, required allegiance to discipline codes or a school's specialized mission/philosophy, and symbolic trappings of

traditionalism (Dean, 1992; Francis, 1990; Glatter, et al., 1997; Walford, 1997a; West, et al., 1997). There is no reason to assume that the same trend would not occur in North American charter schools, as many schools now require parent or student contracts, volunteer hours, adherence to mission statements, or other means that encourage self-segregation by parents to mask selection of students by schools (Carl, 1998; Farber, 1998a; Farber, 1998b; McGhan, 1998; McKibben, 1999; McKinney, 1996; Rothstein, et al., 1998). It seems likely that regulations to block overt selection will be largely ineffectual, as market competition encourages or even forces parents and schools to find ways of sorting themselves.

*Innovation, Differentiation, and Image Management*

This tendency toward emulation in competitive markets raises the issue of the degree to which differences between choices are real, or perceived results of image management. Even in a more stable or static market context, differences between competitors in consumer markets are often emphasized or exaggerated in marketing and presentation. There is not much difference between Pepsi and Coke, or between Ford, Dodge, and GMC trucks. As experience shows, there are two ways to make a profit: (1) innovation in order to attract the consumer with a better value on a better product, (2) or better marketing. In situations where consumer information is obscure or inaccessible (or can be made that way through image management), the latter is more likely. So, producers try to cultivate the all-important brand loyalty (recently, by introducing their products to the captured clientele of schools). Therefore, advertising campaigns often focus on small differences of degrees, and not overwhelming similarities between competing products. In fact, the cola and hamburger wars suggest that the biggest competitors are often the most similar, with the major airlines, network and local newscasts, and big three automakers all but indistinguishable from each other. But instead of focusing on the quality or cost-effectiveness of products as rational-choice theorists would like, these competitors often emphasize questions of style, attitude, and association in appealing to customers and working the market.[33] While small differences and bells-and-whistle (or smoke-and-mirror) innovations may be useful and cost-effective for producers (often simply to enhance profit margins), it is the effectiveness and cost efficiency of marketing that deters the incentive to offer real improvements and costly innovations in a product line.[34] It is often cheaper to cultivate differences in image-association in the eyes of consumers than to research and develop a better alternative to a competitors' product. And marketing is often (even usually) designed to obscure whether a change in a product is an improvement, or simply a change.

This aspect in the logic of markets would also be present for charter schools competing for per-student funding. As schools in the UK and the US become more involved in marketing themselves to potential consumers, it will be important to note the extent to which emphasized differences are a matter of true curricular or pedagogical innovations, or simply repackaging of older ideas and targeting them at a particular segment or demographic group of the market. Niche-marketing simply limits producers to non-growth areas of the market. So, while rational consumers may seek out a school based on academic criteria, much evidence suggests that this is not the case. While choice plans in the UK and many jurisdiction in North America are supported by the publication of league tables or other indicators of relative student achievement, it is very difficult, if not

[33] In a fascinating analysis, Wink (1992, ch. 10) observes this phenomenon in many areas of human competition and conflict — including politics and war — as opposing parties often employ the same means in a contest, thereby emulating or imitating each other in practice, and becoming more alike in essence, while exaggerating differences in order to justify their public positions.

[34] Indeed, a production cost-oriented incentive need not be passed on to the consumer in the form of savings except to the extent that it would slightly undercut a competitor's price — if at all.



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impossible, to give consumers a snapshot of how much one school *enhances* the achievement of a student as compared to other schools. Such efforts are befuddled by problems such as finding the appropriate common metric, or controlling for confounding variables such as peer-effects and socioeconomic status.

In lieu of an easy indicator of a school's ability to enrich a student's potential, rational consumers are forced to rely on other evidence of a school's worth. Unfortunately, evidence from the UK suggests that such indicators are often symbolic reflections of re-emerging social hierarchies — uniforms, the racial and ethnic composition of a school, etc. — rather than immediate academic factors. Indeed, there is much evidence from both North America and the UK that consumers actually gravitate towards these non-academic criteria anyway when choosing a school (Ball & Gewirtz, 1997; Carroll & Walford, 1997a; Carroll & Walford, 1997b; Glazerman, 1998; Hirsch, 1994; Petronio, 1996; Smith & Meier, 1995; Walford, 1992). Many if not most parents are not usually looking for innovation or even excellence. While rational-choice theorists assume that consumers seek the most effective educational option for their children, real-world experience shows parents — constrained by such factors as convenience, transportation, location, work, and the ability and desire to participate in and value a child's education — look at other factors such as sports teams, proximity to home or work, tradition, a student body that reflects their child racially or economically, a child's desire to be with friends (or away from enemies), and so forth. Even rational-choice theorist implicitly affirm this phenomenon, often using racial code words that mask retrenched racism, or segregationist tendencies based on social-class — not educational — differentiation. For example, Moe (1994, p. 27) debates the contention that British parents focus on criteria peripheral to academic enrichment, denying the importance of "sports and uniforms" and instead claiming that informed people want "discipline and order, achievement, and proximity" (Manno, et al., 1998a; Manno, et al., 1998b; Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998; Vanourek, et al., 1997). What is noteworthy about these parental preferences here is that, as advertising increases in importance in a competitive market, these tendencies suggest the likelihood that schools will focus on non-academic criteria in their marketing campaigns, promoting images that do not focus immediately on potential academic enhancement, but on non-academic criteria associated with racial, ethnic, and social class differentiation.

*Constraining Effects of Consumer Perceptions in a Competitive Market*

On the other hand, while markets shape consumers, consumers' perceptions of what are appropriate products often constrain innovation through market forces. Parental assumptions of what a good product or service is — whether toothpaste or schooling — provides incentive for standardization, not just diversification of options. If people think that cola should be caramel colored, then Pepsi Clear will fail. If people equate discipline, rote memorization, and high test scores with a "good" education, then the room for innovation in a market context is constrained. This was the case in the UK, where popular conceptions of education (at least for active consumers) meant that more traditionalism and elitism would be the primary "innovation" driven by the market. Subsequently, in the UK, schools have been forced to pay attention to their image management through marketing, administration, and presentation, often at the expense of educational concerns (Ball & Gewirtz, 1997; Gewirtz, et al., 1995). This may, in fact, be one of the central elements of the market dynamic that is the constraining factor in education quasi-markets in North America, as parental perceptions of what "good" schooling is are manifested in a confining demand for "back-to-basics" schooling. Kohn (1998), for example, claims that affluent and ambitious parents in the US do not want innovations in their children's education, but, instead, what are commonly seen as solid, tried-and-true educational practices. On the other hand, people often cannot reach a common understanding of truly "innovative" education. Global Learning Academy in Calgary was established to try "differentiated"

learning, an "innovative" approach to education. But the school closed after parents and even different teachers could not agree on what that means (Sheppard, 1998).

## Discussion

This essay should not be understood as an argument against the potential for market-oriented schools to foster diverse and innovative options. Instead, I have attempted to demonstrate that there are standardizing tendencies also inherent in the market mechanisms imported into public education, and that accounting for these tendencies helps us understand the unexceptional record of charter schools in promoting experimentation in teaching and learning. However, the preceding discussion raises both implications and questions that deserve further attention.

### *Diversity*

Diverse options are often apparent in charter schools, GM schools and CTCs. Indeed, some of these schools appear to embrace intensive use of technology, offer various pedagogical approaches such as a "back-to-basics" or discipline-area oriented curriculum, and smaller class and school sizes. However, while I have noted that none of these "innovations" are really new, another trend is toward ethnic-based and home-schooled instruction. These options definitely offer a differentiated set of options to consumers. Although school segregation (by law, tradition, residency, or even self-segregation) is not new or innovative, what is unique about such trends is that they legitimize resegregation of "public" schools in the post-*Brown v. Board* era. Of course, public schools have been notoriously segregated by race and class in recent decades. But pursuing the differentiation of provision through the option of race- and ethnic-based schools represents a legal institutionalization of that segregation through the auspices of a democratically-run institution that had once been known as the "common" school. Likewise, "home-instruction" is largely a move by home-schoolers to opt-in to public financing of privately-oriented education after having exited public schools (see e.g., Americans United for Separation of Church and State, 1997; Finn, et al., 1997; Rothstein, et al., 1998). These new consumer options raise questions about the balance of publicly-funded private consumer rights against the public interest in cultivating a common culture, tolerance, and social cohesion with public resources for the public good. Such "diversity" of consumer choices in charter school options stands in stark contrast to liberal efforts to achieve diversity over the last several decades.

### *Contrasting Sources of Innovation*

Charter school reformers publicly advance their agenda as a consumer-oriented reform measure. However, experience with consumer markets indicates that markets can also be producer-oriented — a phenomenon that turns the causal tables on charter reformers' assumptions. Yet this fact is ignored by market-oriented reformers in their advocacy of charter schools. Furthermore, as it becomes more evident that private bureaucracies can be just as inflexible as public bureaucracies, one wonders why this is not also reflected in the rhetoric promoting charter schools. If government bureaucracies squash innovative tendencies due to self-interest, do not loyalties to stockholders also divert innovative potentialities that arise around customer service in private bureaucracies? Yet many charter school reformers persist in advancing the simplistic image of an innovative private sector juxtaposed to a constraining public sector. This stark simplification is reminiscent of Orwell's *Animal Farm* — two feet, bad; four feet, good (Chomsky & Barsamian, 1996, p. 121). But this assumption ignores considerable evidence of the innovative powers of public sectors, constraining factors in private sectors, and the folly of automatically oppositionalizing them — all of which should problematize and complexify such claims (Cohen, 1982; Kuttner, 1997; see, e.g., Coulson, 1996).

Indeed, this question of innovation leading to diversity in education parallels evidence in the consumer markets that charter school reformers often highlight. But their references to these markets only appear to consider one side of the equation. Another example might be seen in the dialectical process outlined by Darwin's theory of evolution (and, indeed, much of market theory reflects this in its survival-of-the-fittest ethos). One of the three basic dynamics on which this theory of organic processes is based is standardization (as the synthesis). That is, evolution posits that the thesis of uniformity is challenged by an aberration (the anti-thesis), which, depending on the conditions, may challenge or even overwhelm the status quo, resulting in a new synthesis. Thus, standardization is just as much an essential part of such a process as is innovation, and is necessary for the process of change to unfold.[35] Both public and private institutions are often likened to organisms, and they can be flexible in their youth, and stagnant and defensive in maturity. Wink (1992) uses a religious analogy to describe this pattern: institutions are created, fallen, and/or redeemed.

*Market Fundamentalism*

Religious imagery may also help explain the treatment, or de-emphasis, of evidence in market-oriented reformers' advocacy of their agenda. The single-mindedness of market-oriented reformers in perceiving only favorable evidence from consumer markets suggests a zealotry of faith in market mechanisms. Indeed, the prolific application of market models to public schools was preceded by very little hard evidence as to their effects in modern education. While this was partly due to the fact that there are virtually no comprehensive and analogous models from which to draw policy inferences on how markets would work in schools,[36] it is also indicative of an ideological faith in market processes — a belief system that assures the faithful of the power of market discipline as a corrective to wayward public sector institutions (thus discounting the need for evidence). In fact, the discourse is littered with references to "beliefs" on this issue, in lieu of hard or compelling evidence on the power of markets to diversify and innovate provision of education.[37] But, as with any fundamentalist, market-oriented reformers appear capable of selective perception limited to confirming evidence. They are able to ignore or explain away any confounding evidence that challenges their beliefs in the power of markets to provide.[38] Charter school advocates do not demonstrate that markets foster innovation in charter school classrooms, because they have already seen enough evidence from (a one-sided view of) the auto industry to "prove" that diversification and innovation fall within the purview of markets. Hence, market reformers are unable or unwilling to consider, much less embrace, contradictory tendencies in markets that both diversify and standardize consumer options.

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[35] Natural processes are particularly pertinent here, since many market-oriented reformers promote their agenda as a natural or organic alternative to artificial state regulation — premised on the assumption of a universal human nature preoccupied with pursuing one's own self-interest. For a fascinating discussion of standardization in dynamic organic processes, see Gould (1989).

[36] Coulson disputes the lack of evidence (1996; 1994; 1999).

[37] Ironically, this is similar to how school expansion in general is often forwarded by religious-like faith and rhetoric regarding the power of education (Bowen, 1999; Meyer, 1986; Mockler, 1994; Tyack, Kirst, & Hansot, 1980; Walkom, 1990).

[38] After Disney bought the American Broadcasting Corporation, Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes wrote: "In a world torn by every kind of fundamentalism — religious, ethnic, nationalist and tribal — we must grant first place to economic fundamentalism, with its religious conviction that the market, left to its own devices, is capable of resolving all our problems. This faith has its own ayatollahs. Its church is neo-liberalism; its creed is profit; its prayers are for monopolies; and now its halos are Mickey Mouse ears." (quoted in The Mennonite, 1996, p. 17; see also Walkom, 1990)

Moreover, like any faith, market fundamentalism establishes a version of human nature as a universal truth. Their claim that innovation will flow from individuals when they are unleashed to naturally pursue the enhancement of their self-interest depends on a very debatable assumption of a universal human nature. While market-oriented reformers claim that maximizing self-interest is the driving force of human progress, there is also evidence to suggest that, indeed, "human nature" is shaped by social, cultural, and institutional conditions as well. Furthermore, it appears that some people are willing to take risks and pursue innovations out of philanthropic and humanitarian impulses, or simple curiosity.

*Research and Policy Borrowing*

While the lack of compelling evidence from education suggests the ideological (as opposed to empirical) nature of this reform agenda, the global scale of market reforms raises issues regarding the role or research, evidence, and ideology across socio-political contexts. Particularly in the cases of the UK and North America, the similarities of these reforms point to either intentional policy sharing or applications of universal aspects of market ideology. For the most part, the UK led the way with these reforms, from Thatcher's government through the present Blair administration. Yet the generally critical British research literature has failed to penetrate the US discourse to any great extent (Moe, 1994). That is, while policy borrowing appears to be prevalent, policymakers demonstrate a concurrent and curious hesitancy to engage in serious "research borrowing." While part of this may be due to a chronic ethnocentrism on the part of American policymakers, such parochialism is increasingly inexcusable in a time when research is widely accessible, and contexts and policies are becoming more similar. Whitty, for instance, who has been vocal in his observation of the lack of innovation in the UK market reforms, has been quite willing to share his insights with North American audiences (e.g., Miner, 1997). It is unclear why there has not been more discussion in North America of the UK experience *before* embarking on rapid and widespread market-oriented reforms, and one can only speculate about the knowledge and intentions of policymakers and market reformers. This raises questions about the ability of research and evidence to influence an ideologically-driven reform agenda. But it also raises questions about "hegemonic" control of the discourse; that is, what are the interests of the people who have the microphone, and how are their interests and agenda served and challenged by research evidence?

On the other hand, some observers speculate on the existence of "policy networks" to explain the apparent policy copying between different contexts (Carl, 1994; Whitty & Edwards, 1998). Indeed, there is evidence of trans-Atlantic collusion and cooperation of like-minded think tanks and other interests. Yet we cannot discount the possibility that similarities in market-oriented policies are indicative of the ideological paradigm of the times — reflecting not so much policy-borrowing as what Levin (1998) sees as a disease or "epidemic" of such policymaking in the era it defines. However, while his analogy discounts intentional learning and application by policymakers of the market *zeitgeist* explanation, other evidence indicates that recently, deliberate policy-copying is now occurring in an easterly direction. Although the UK set the precedent for quasi-market reforms of education, the election of Blair's Labour Party set the stage for the US to become a model. It appears that Blair has modeled much of his political strategy on his neoliberal mentor in Clinton on issues such as welfare reform (Jones, 1998; McGuire, 1998/1999). In education, likewise, the re-emergence of "crisis" rhetoric in the UK suggests not a dissatisfaction with the results of the Tory education policies so much as a desire to continue to cultivate popular support for reforms (e.g., British Broadcasting Corporation, 1999). In the *New Statesman* — a forum for New Labour "modernizers" — Bilefsky (1998) recently advanced the possibility of emulating US for-profit model for charter schools in the UK. Now it appears that this model will be imported as the corrective disciplinarian for poorly performing schools (MacLeod, 1999a; MacLeod, 1999b; Rafferty, 1999), thereby legitimizing the location of blame as the fault of individual

schools (see Thrupp, 1998). Moreover, the Edison Project has plans for international expansion, including the UK (Walsh, 1998a).

*Questions for Further Investigation*

This exploration also raises several question for which a search for answers is beyond the scope of this paper. Issues deserving of further attention include:

- *What market conditions promote either the diversification or standardization of consumer options?* What conditions support or constrain innovations? To what extent can those conditions be manipulated through policy instruments? How would they apply to education quasi-markets?
- *What precedents are available regarding public financing of R & D efforts by private providers, particularly examples that speak to the potential benefits and dangers inherent in the charter school model?* While public money has long gone to non-profit research foundations and universities, what lessons can be learned from the examples set in public resources and prerogatives going to for-profit endeavors? Some might claim that the defense industry, for example, has abused its position with wasteful and fraudulent use of public monies for research and development (e.g., Multinational Monitor, 1999). Others might point to the general beneficial effects of public funding, proprietary allowances, or private prerogatives granted to private endeavors in pharmaceutical research, for instance (e.g., Tullock, 1996).
- *To what extent does the participation or penetration of investment capital promote or constrain innovations in market-oriented schools?* Do successful investment capital operations tend to become cautious, looking for ways to maintain position? Or are such endeavors more likely to pursue risks and support entrepreneurial efforts? (On this trend in education, see Walsh, 1998b)
- *What is the role of the common good in constraining and cultivating innovation and diversification?* Furthermore, what is the role of the state or the public in defining the common good and its application to this question? There appears to be a presumption that diversification is inherently good. But are more choices always better? To what extent does the diversification of consumer options encourage a move toward the lowest common denominator, and drive down the general quality of choices? For example, some neoconservatives might claim the state has an interest in regulating the entertainment industry to the extent that the pursuit of profits promotes licentiousness, hedonism, and bad taste. Similarly, health advocates might make a parallel claim regarding the duty of the state to monitor or regulate the fast food or tobacco industries, thereby constraining consumer choices. A better example, perhaps, involves consumer rights in the auto industry. Bennett et al. (1998) claim that a monopolistic Detroit auto industry failed to heed consumer preference by building too many "expensive, gas-guzzling vehicles" in the 1970s and 1980s (p. 28). While the Detroit auto industry did eventually respond to the challenge posed by more fuel-efficient Japanese imports, recent trends indicate that — at least partially because of consumer demand and marketing — all automakers are now building more "expensive, gas-guzzling vehicles" than ever before, as light trucks and sport utility vehicles now outnumber cars in new vehicle sales. Does anyone claim that more dangerous, less efficient, more polluting vehicles (driven by consumer preference and image manufacturing) enhance the common good? The aggregate effects may be detrimental to all. But what is the role of the state and the public set against the rights of the consumer in this question? The answer would have implications for the role of the state and public in the regulation of consumer choice and competitive provision in market-oriented education.
- *Finally, what is the appropriate role of the state in a democratic society in requiring rational choice?* The implications of this question are important. Since it is not always clear to consumers whenever marketing represents information on innovations or the obfuscation of a lack of improvements, does the state have a role in regulating this information in the interest of full disclosure? If a free-market society is premised on the

free-flow of information to allow full exercise of rational choice, does the state need to intervene, ironically, in order to defend the laissez-faire elements inherent in a competitive system of information-based choice? Furthermore, does the state need to require the provision of true choice, or the guarantee of a range of options, if market failure constrains those aspects of a system of consumer choice in an area like education?

In conclusion, this essay demonstrates that there is a standardizing tendency inherent in markets that both accompanies and counteracts the potential for diversification that competitive markets can generate. This analysis is an attempt to provide a more balanced view of the logical dynamics of market processes in education than that which is now evident in policy discourse of choice in education. Thus, while not disputing that there are some economic incentives for innovation and experimentation embedded in the logic of markets, the examples discussed here indicate that tendencies neglected in policy discourse can also have opposing effects. Market-oriented reformers generally ignore the constraining properties of competitive markets in their discussion of the potential effects of competition in education. Their assumptions of diverse and innovative options are overly optimistic and simplistic. In lieu of evidence on the workings of market mechanisms in education, they make one-sided allusions to consumer markets, or ideological assumptions about how markets should work in education.

The experiences of charter school reformers in North America has led to a reconfiguration of the claims for charter schools. Premised on the claim that public school classrooms were inherently unproductive because of bureaucratic LEA governance, charter school reformers promised that a change in governance would lead to innovations in the classroom. As real-world problems and competitive markets dynamics constrain the ability to deliver innovations, they effectively retract their promise of classroom experimentation in favor of the more easily attainable goal of offering options in various localities. Reformers ignore the examples of competitive quasi-markets in the UK, and fail to take a more balanced view of consumer markets. This analysis calls into question the claim that the lack of educational innovation was unpredictable. Thus, while promises of educational innovation can be seen as harmless or well-intentioned in themselves, the actual standardization trends expose the imprecision of such claims. And their predictability highlights the service that those false claims provided for investors in opening up public education as a market for profit-making ventures.

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